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Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah of Kashmir, 1965-75: From externment to entronement

Abstract

Ousted as Premier, Jammu and Kashmir, in August 1953 and anointed as Chief Minister in February 1975, the so-called 'Lion of Kashmir' Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah was imprisoned, in between these years, ultimately on charges of treason, with brief intermissions. Much has been written about the p Kashmir dispute, olitics of so about the Sheikh and his personal troubles especially after the death of his friend, Jawaharlal Nehru in May 1964. This somewhat overshadowed decade of his life, in comparison to his hey-days of 1947-53, shows the kind of settlement in Kashmir that the government of Indira Gandhi was willing to consider. More interestingly, it shows how Sheikh Abdullah was willing to agree to it and provides the context in which he moved from being in a conflictual relationship with New Delhi to becoming, once again, a collaborator in Srinagar in 1975; thereby showcasing the limits of Abdullah's politics and popularity.

Keywords: Kashmir, India, Sheikh Abdullah, Indira Gandhi

Introduction

Between August 1953 and June 1972, Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah of Kashmir spent twelve years in Indian jails under four different spells of arrest, detention and internment (Abdullah, 1993). During this period, the state of Jammu and Kashmir saw, successively, the regimes of

the corrupt Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad,¹ ineffective Ghulam Mohammad Sadiq² and the Congressman Syed Mir Qasim.³ Simultaneously, the government of India put together a constitutional and electoral facade there, starting from 1957. From June 1972, however, Abdullah entered into negotiations with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, leading to the Indira-Sheikh Accord and his consequent return as Chief Minister in February 1975. The Sheikh's troubles through the 1950s and 1960s have been put down to his ambitions and ambiguities regarding the place of Jammu and Kashmir within the Indian union (Guha, 2008). Subsequently, however, the India-Pakistan wars of 1965 and 1971 made him see quite clearly that, first, an independent Kashmir and, second, Pakistan's participation in any process towards it, were now out of question. The period 1965-75, thus, provides for a compelling study of the trajectory of the Kashmir question and the turn-about in its chief protagonist, at this time, as he went from being a *persona non grata* in the state to becoming its Chief Minister. Based on the papers of the Gandhian Jayaprakash Narayan (hereafter, JP), journalist JJ Singh,⁴ Quaker pacifist Horace Alexander,⁵ and the bureaucrat PN Haksar, each of whom were involved in this transition in Abdullah's personal fortunes and the concomitant shift in Kashmir's political track, this article attempts to delineate the key themes, events and personalities of this process and throws a different light on the hopes and fears of all concerned. It approaches the problem of Kashmir and the personality of Sheikh Abdullah, in this period, within the prism of democratic

¹ Born in 1907, the Bakshi was a National Conference politician, who served as Premier, Kashmir from 1953 to 1964. He died in 1972.

² Born in 1912, Sadiq succeeded the Bakshi in 1964 and then continued in the renamed office of Chief Minister, Kashmir till 1971.

³ See Qasim, *My Life and Times*. He was the Chief Minister of Kashmir from 1971 to 1975.

⁴ On JJ Singh, see Shaffer, 'JJ Singh and the India League of America, 1945-1959'.

⁵ On Alexander, see Ankit, 'Quaker Pacifist and Indian Politics'.

manipulation manufacturing a moment for meeting Kashmiri aspirations and Abdullah's aims within the Indian union. In traversing this trajectory, the tracks of Sheikh Abdullah's political career provide a touching rod, over-shadowed by the well-documented minutiae of the special constitutional arrangement of Kashmir with India, namely Article 370 (Noorani, 2011, 2012).

The twists and turns herein can be located in the large context of the politics of resistance in Kashmir, which in turn they serve to illuminate, having had a chequered relationship with it. With the state currently locked in a conflict against the society, much of the recent past, 1990s, and a lot of the last decade (2008-17) has been a catalogue of determinisms – historical and political, imaginations – of sacred soil and profane people, ideologies – post-colonial and primordial, and resistance – of everyday life. In such a scenario, Abdullah's political career that served as a rationale for Kashmiri politics for so long, then, serves as a *raison d'être* to reflect upon it, today. After all, Abdullah was the peasant mobiliser of 1930s-40s, who became the Prime Minister (1947-53) and was the rebel imprisoned for sedition (1953-72), who was first installed and then reduced to running a patron-client administration (1977-82). This meant that while for New Delhi, Abdullah went from being a man who for long personified the 'Kashmir problem',⁶ to becoming the person on whom the latter relied for the solution to the problem;⁷ for Kashmiris, he made the journey in reverse: from personifying the ideal of 'self-determination' and symbolising aspirations of 'identity assertion',⁸ to exemplifying the smothering and stifling of the crucial questions of its relations with India.⁹ Quite naturally then,

⁶ Guha, 'Opening a Window in Kashmir', p. 3905.

⁷ Lockwood, 'Kashmir: Sheikh Abdullah's Reinstatement', p. 256.

⁸ Lockwood, 'Sheikh Abdullah and the Politics of Kashmir', p. 395.

⁹ Puri, 'The Era of Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah', p. 186.

the corpus of writings on ‘demystifying’ Abdullah, as well as ‘understanding’ Kashmir comprise the entire range from the uncritical to the condemnatory.¹⁰

1965-67

Sheikh Abdullah was arrested on 7 May 1965 from the Palam airport in New Delhi as he stepped out of his flight and was taken to Kodaikanal in Tamil Nadu. He had gone abroad on 13 February on the Hajj pilgrimage and the charges against him read like, at best, vague assumptions, namely that he had been ‘leaning towards Pakistan embassies abroad’ and that in his meeting with the Chinese Premier Chu En-Lai at Algiers, he had allegedly discussed Kashmir’s independence. His friends – from the self-proclaimed *Gandhi’s emissary* Sudhir Ghosh,¹¹ to Horace Alexander and from the *rebel-activist with a cause* Mridula Sarabhai (Basu, 1996) to JP – had been worried for the unpredictable and the temperamental Sheikh during this visit. Twenty days into his trip, Ghosh had shared his anxiety with Alexander when the Sheikh headed to the United Kingdom (UK) that ‘...if, under pressure from over-zealous British newspaper men, Sheikh Abdullah makes a few unwise statements in London...A few wrong remarks will give those elements in the Congress party who are anxious to push their knives

¹⁰ See Bazaz, *Inside Kashmir, The History of Struggle for Freedom in Kashmir and Democracy through Intimidation and Terror*; Saraf, *Kashmiris Fight for Freedom*, Volumes 1 and 2; Taseer, *The Kashmir of Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah*; Mullick, *My Years with Nehru: Kashmir*; Bhattacharjee, *Tragic Hero of Kashmir* and Hussain, *Sheikh Abdullah*; and, Para, ‘Demystifying Sheikh Abdullah’. Also, see Abdullah’s own, *Flames of the Chinar*. See the latest addition to the massive literature on Kashmir, Snedden, *Understanding Kashmir and Kashmiris*.

¹¹ See Ghosh, *Gandhi’s Emissary*.

into Sheikh the necessary handle to upset the possibility of any settlement'.¹² Two days before his return, Mridula Sarabhai was convinced as she confided in JP that 'there is no doubt left that even before he went abroad, a conspiracy had been hatched to create such circumstances as would compel him to remain out of the country'.¹³

Mridula alleged that the Congress hardliners had, actually, not wanted the Sheikh to get a passport to go abroad, instead wanting him arrested, and, second, they had sought to spread an impression that 'Sheikh Abdullah was reluctant to call himself an Indian'. They had taken up the story of the Sheikh's leanings towards Pakistan embassies abroad, started a storm on his utterances abroad and, finally, after the news came of Abdullah's meeting with Chou En-Lai, clamoured for action against Abdullah, getting the government to cancel the endorsements on his passport and asking him to return by 30 April. She was convinced that 'a decision had been taken that if Sheikh Saheb returns, he would be arrested immediately and sent to an unknown place for house detention' and was writing to JP to intervene 'to stop this...to persuade the Government not to arrest Sheikh Saheb on arrival and give him an opportunity to explain his activities to the country'. As her own efforts 'seemed to be falling' and there was a possibility of the 'Jana Sangh members creating uproar', she needed JP's good offices to 'normalise the relationship' between the Sheikh and the government. Claiming a deep-seated conspiracy, Mridula claimed that her correspondence with the Sheikh, while he was abroad, had been stopped and Abdullah's letter to Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri explaining his position

¹² Sudhir Ghosh to Horace Alexander, 3 March 1965, File No 577/60, Horace Alexander Papers, Friends' House, Euston (London).

¹³ Mridula Sarabhai to JP, 5 May 1965, Subject File Serial No 89, III Instalment, JP Papers, Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, NMML (New Delhi).

was mysteriously lost to prevent 'Sheikh Saheb's version to reach Lal Bahadurji'. She also informed JP that, contrary to the widespread and prejudicial claims about Abdullah's anti-India utterances abroad, the returning Hajjis had reported that 'in the Muslim Conference at Mecca and in Saudi Arabia, Sheikh Saheb's role was exemplary'. He had worked in close collaboration with government of India's deputation and repudiated Pakistan's allegations. So it may have been indeed, as Indira Gandhi, then Information and Broadcasting Minister, agreed with Horace Alexander that 'certainly the Parliament and the press got unnecessarily excited over the Sheikh's speeches and his meeting with Chou En-Lai'. But, pointing out the intense popular feeling against the 'misguided' Sheikh, while 'personally' giving him the benefit of doubt, she explained the big picture to Alexander thus:

What Sheikh Sahib does not realise is that with the Chinese invasion and the latest moves in and by Pakistan, the position of Kashmir had completely changed. The frontiers of Kashmir touch China, USSR, Pakistan and India. In the present world situation, an independent Kashmir would become a hot-bed of intrigue and, apart from the countries mentioned above, would also attract espionage and other activities from the USA and UK.¹⁴

While 'not clear' what the Sheikh wanted, Indira Gandhi knew that 'his pride' had been 'badly hurt' and was concerned that most people in the Congress and the government did not know Abdullah personally and, in fact, had 'a kind of a block against him'. As India and Pakistan were fighting each other to a stalemate in September 1965 (Bajwa, 2013), friends and well-wishers of Abdullah were coming around to a consensus that despite Kashmir being on the agenda of the United Nations Security Council since 1948 and thus making Pakistan a party to the dispute, the real issue was whether India would be able to satisfy the aspirations of the

¹⁴ Indira Gandhi to Horace Alexander, 24 May 1965, File No 577/60, Horace Alexander Papers.

people of Kashmir. But, they despaired at the government's ham-handed responses to these aspirations, having 'become prisoners in the hands of the quislings we have created in Kashmir'. They rued the fact that New Delhi did not see it fit to release Sheikh Abdullah, his associate, and founder of the Plebiscite Front, Mirza Afzal Beg and others and dent Pakistani propaganda that 'Kashmiri freedom fighters' were fighting against India with Pakistan having nothing to do with it. However, it was not just Indira Gandhi who was not clear what Abdullah wanted. JJ Singh and Jayaprakash Narayan too were in the same boat but on one thing they felt sure, namely, that Abdullah and Afzal Beg did not want to join Pakistan. Certain of this, they vented their ire on the 'squirming, yelling and screaming pygmies in power in Kashmir today':

... And we have not got the guts to ignore these small men even though that would be in our national interest. The silver-tongued DP Dhar, who can sell even the wallpaper from the walls, backed by Karan Singh, has sold the line to our government that we can keep Kashmir come what may. That suits us to the tee. Mir Qasim who has suddenly blossomed forth as a Kashmir intellectual keeps on theorising and lecturing on secularism and refuses to face facts as they exist in the valley. That suits us too. GM Sadiq is glued to the chair of the Premiership, which he seems to love so much now. He, with the help of Banerji, who represents our might, can always assure Mr Nanda that law and order will be kept. That, of course, suits us too.¹⁵

JP, distressed like all those who had worked for better relations between India and Pakistan, decided in consultation with another Gandhian, Vinoba Bhave, to send Radhakrishna (Secretary, Sarva Seva Sangh) and Narayan Desai (Secretary, Shanti Seva Mandal) to Abdullah, in detention at Kodaikanal. He hoped that the Sheikh would talk to them freely. He sent along

¹⁵ JJ Singh to JP, 18 September 1965, Correspondences, Brahmanand Papers, NMML. DP Dhar, born in 1918, was a minister at both Srinagar and New Delhi and, as a close aide of Indira Gandhi, served as India's Ambassador in the Soviet Union. He died in 1975.

a letter for Abdullah in which he called Pakistan's actions in 1965 a 'great disillusionment' and made it clear that 'Pakistan is utterly mistaken to think that the Kashmir question can be solved by force. However, that being their clear policy now, our whole thinking has to be re-adjusted'.¹⁶ Abdullah was delighted to meet Radhakrishna and Desai and have a 'full, frank and free' exchange of views with them. However, he was still speaking the language that made had made New Delhi suspicious of him for all these years. He wrote to JP that the trouble was that India refuses to acknowledge that there is a problem in Kashmir in the first place, that the problem must be faced in a 'realistic manner' and 'Indian leaders must express their readiness to explore *all avenues* to arrive at a solution acceptable to *all parties* concerned'.¹⁷ As far as the Sheikh was concerned, Pakistan was still a party to the dispute and independence was still an option for Kashmir. But, he would start thawing in the spring of 1966.

Now, his position was gravitating towards an 'honourable agreement reached freely without any duress' with the Government of India and, keeping in mind the Indian feeling that Pakistan does not have to be involved in the talks between Kashmir and India, only then informing Pakistan and the world at large about it. The Sheikh sent his son-in-law, GM Shah, to JJ Singh carrying his reassuring message that he emphatically considered India 'his own country' and, there should not be any doubts about this, anymore. The fact that he returned in 1965 and did not indulge in any anti-India propaganda abroad was proof enough. Of course, he would continue to fight for the principle of self-determination for his people and whatever agreement is reached between India and Kashmir, it would have to be ratified by the people of Kashmir. He was willing to sit down across the table with New Delhi and approach the problem with an

¹⁶ JP to Sheikh Abdullah, 29 September 1965, Correspondences, Brahmanand Papers.

¹⁷ Sheikh Abdullah to JP, 7 October 1965, Correspondences, Brahmanand Papers.

open mind. He was willing to consider options other than plebiscite and independence. He asked Shah to convey to JJ Singh and, via him, to JP to not send any emissaries, as he could do nothing, while in detention. He had refused to meet the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Bhaktavatsalam, as well, and, it was up to the government of India now to make up their minds about the talks, release him, eschew the use of force in Kashmir and create the necessary atmosphere for the talks. The other thing on which, Abdullah was emphatic was that he did not want to have anything to do with ‘any Kashmiris who call themselves leaders of today’.¹⁸

However, the Sheikh would have to wait, for the government of India was not in a position to tackle Kashmir yet. Lal Bahadur Shastri’s sudden death in January 1966 had led to the installation of Indira Gandhi as Prime Minister and the years of 1966 to 1969 were tough times for her. She had to fight the old-guard in her own party, the opposition in the 1967 elections – in which the Congress did badly at the Centre and worse at the states – and the acute food situation (Guha, 2008). The peaceniks continued their pressure though. JJ Singh requested her in the summer of 1966 to release Sheikh Abdullah. He reminded her that ‘to hold a general election in Kashmir with Sheikh Abdullah in prison is like the British ordering an election in India while Jawaharlal Nehru was in prison’; that ‘to think that we will eventually wear down the people [of Kashmir] and force them to accept at least passively the Union is to delude ourselves’; that ‘release of Abdullah, a settlement with him and full internal autonomy, that is, a return to the original terms of the accession may give us the only chance’ and, finally, that if ‘the Sheikh fought and won in the [1967] election, it could be shown that they [the Kashmiris]

¹⁸ JJ Singh to JP, 30 April 1966, Subject File Serial No 87, III Instalment, JP Papers.

had taken that decision freely at an election run by their own genuine leaders...Pakistan will have no grounds left to interfere in their affairs'.¹⁹

JP sent Radhakrishna Patil to Delhi and Srinagar to meet the authorities and apprise him of their thinking and vice-versa. Patil met Home Minister YB Chavan in Delhi and Chief Minister GM Sadiq in Srinagar. He also spent some time looking into the political prospects in the Kashmir valley with respect to the upcoming 1967 elections. On his return, Patil claimed to JP that the only thing that seemed clear to him was that for the first time there would be closely contested elections in the Valley. With the legendarily corrupt, former Chief Minister, Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad no longer in power, the style and substance of the lead-up to the elections as well as the actual event promised to be different. Bakshi and his supporters who knew how elections were held in the past were not sure of themselves this time as they sought to challenge the Congress, which enjoyed the full backing of the official machinery. Patil concluded tentatively that as 'the Congress has the organisation of the old National Conference behind it, informed opinion concedes a majority of seats to the Congress with Bakshi and the Jana Sangh registering substantial gains'.²⁰ Patil had met Home Minister YB Chavan, enroute to Srinagar, on 27 November 1966. He knew Chavan well. In 1954, they had both been Ministers in the states of Bombay and Central Province, respectively. Chavan narrated to Patil how when he was the Defence Minister, at the instance of Jawaharlal Nehru, he had met Abdullah in 1964. Nehru was present at the interview but did not speak. Chavan remembered that, he felt during the talk, Abdullah frequently adopted attitudes and aired views, which raised doubts in his mind if he was looking at things from an Indian viewpoint. For instance, he did not condemn the

¹⁹ JJ Singh to Indira Gandhi, 23 June 1966, JJ Singh Papers, NMML.

²⁰ RK Patil to JP, 21 December 1966, Subject File Serial No 87, III Instalment, JP Papers.

Chinese aggression unequivocally. But when Patil asked Chavan whether he felt that the war of 1965 could in anyway be related to the visit of Abdullah abroad or to the impressions he had conveyed to Pakistan about conditions in Kashmir, the Home Minister refused to implicate Abdullah saying that he had absolutely no grounds to feel like that and, though the raiders had made a point of Abdullah's detention and had timed the raid to coincide with 9 August, the day on which the Sheikh was first arrested in 1953, Chavan did not think the Sheikh was connected with the raid.

However, Chavan added that he had formed the impression in 1964, when he had talks with the Sheikh, that 'the Sheikh always considered himself something different from an Indian Muslim'²¹ and, his recent correspondence/parleys with JP notwithstanding, his feeling on the matter had in fact been emboldened. Moreover, whatever may be the situation about Sheikh Sahib's present views; Chavan told Patil that it was an extremely inopportune time to consider the matter which could only be considered afresh after the results of the elections, when new governments would be in the saddle at the centre and in the states. Two days later, Patil met Sadiq and told him that he had come to explain the upshot of the conversations that JP had recently had with Sheikh Abdullah. Sadiq listened carefully and, contrary to Chavan, said that there was a definite indication of a change in Sheikh Sahib's attitude. When Patil reminded him of the adverse comments he had made on JP's meetings with Sheikh Abdullah, Sadiq clarified that that he had objected to the publicity and not to the interview. Patil pointed out that Sadiq's press interview had referred to the possibility of 'unsettling settled facts' and this referred to the JP-Abdullah meet itself. He also reminded Sadiq that his press comments had come after he had initially told Patil that not only would he have no objection to JP meeting

²¹ Ibid. (Notes of RK's meetings with Chavan and Sadiq, sent to JP)

Abdullah but that he would welcome it. His adverse statements now not only put Patil in a false position but, had also been strongly resented by JP. Sadiq assured Patil that he would take an early opportunity of clarifying the position with JP.

1967-70

1967 elections came and went with Abdullah very much in detention at Kodaikanal. In Kashmir, they had not quite been free and fair, despite Patil's hopes. In 22/75 constituencies the Congress candidate was returned unopposed, when his rivals' nomination papers were rejected.²² Consequently, conditions in the valley took a turn for worse in June 1967. JJ Singh, who was vacationing with family in Srinagar, was an eye-witness to the events. As conditions became miserable and the anti-India slogans became pro-Pakistan, he wrote to his 'Dear Indu' plainly telling her that the 'government of Kashmir virtually abdicated on the 7th of June'.²³ The present leadership was most ineffective and JJ had heard about a split between Indira's chosen trio of GM Sadiq, Mir Qasim and DP Dhar. JJ had had two talks with the Prime Minister before coming to Srinagar. These had revealed the weakness of her position. Even while thinking about Kashmir and the release of Abdullah, she did not think it advisable to do anything until after the parliament had adjourned. A year earlier, in June 1966, she had told JJ: 'this is not the time', with the forthcoming elections. JJ Singh now wondered whether the election results would have been any different, if Sheikh Abdullah had been released. In his opinion, the opposition to Abdullah's release in Parliament was likely to be restricted to the Jana Sangh members. The Swatantrata, the Socialists, the DMK and the Communists would hardly make

²² *Thought*, 11 February 1967; quoted in Guha, *India after Gandhi*, p. 430.

²³ JJ Singh to Indira Gandhi, 11 June 1967, Subject File Serial No 87, III Instalment, JP Papers.

any fuss about it, JJ exhorted Mrs Gandhi, ‘if their leaders are called in for a private conference with you where you could explain that the chances of a settlement of the Kashmir issue with the help of Sheikh Abdullah were pretty good and definitely worthwhile trying’. JJ knew, as did both JP and the Prime Minister, that more subtle opposition would come from the anti-Indira Congressites. He felt that as the Prime Minister could not appease them, she should not attempt to. Instead, she should confront them as she had done in the presidential election of Dr Zakir Hussain.

But, first, Indira Gandhi had to be convinced that the Sheikh’s release was the right decision and JJ Singh was trying hard to do that. He gave her a graphic account of the arson, burning of churches and mob-violence in Srinagar: ‘When stones were thrown at me, they shouted “*hamara dushman*”’. Gandhi aunt, Krishna Hutheesingh, was in Srinagar and her car was stoned at the gates of the guest house, where she was staying. For JJ, India was sitting on a volcano in Kashmir – ‘you never know when it will burst’. Mir Qasim admitted to him on 8 June that administration had failed to protect life and property in Srinagar. Next day, a rumour spread that Abdullah, who had been brought to Delhi for medical check-up, had passed away and hundreds of people started gathering, before a special bulletin by Radio Kashmir put the record straight. Begging Gandhi to take the initiative, urging the release of Sheikh Abdullah on 1 July, when the detention directive was to end irrespective of the opposition, JJ suggested a round-table with all the Kashmiri leaders. The long letter ended on an urgent note:

The more I see and hear, the more confirmed I am in my feeling that there is not very much time to lose. Pakistan’s nefarious intentions are on the upsurge. More Kashmiris listen to Pakistan Radio

then to AIR. Please act in your forthright and fearless manner notwithstanding the cautious approach your advisers are advocating.²⁴

At the Prime Minister's Office, at least one man was aware that India's relations with Kashmir had reached a 'critical stage'. PN Haksar, the all-powerful Secretary to the Prime Minister, held that India had a 'certain vision which bound J&K to the rest of India [and] that vision is dimmed'.²⁵ Sending her a note before she met Sadiq, Haksar hoped that she would speak to him strongly about the state of affairs in Kashmir and ensure that Sadiq, Mir Qasim and others would work together in the service of their people thereby renewing their common faith. Turning towards the knotty problem of the future of Sheikh Abdullah, Haksar warned her that 'it is a difficult question, but we have to face it and Shri Sadiq and his colleague will have to face it also. Even if we do not face it today, we shall have to do so tomorrow or the day-after'. Haksar well understood the disillusionment of JP, JJ Singh, Mridula Sarabhai and others but argued that 'the behaviour of Kashmiri Pandits does not provide adequate justification for disillusionment and disenchantment'. Eventually, almost three years to the month he was arrested in 1965, Sheikh Abdullah was released in March 1968. It was her cautious advisers, who had prevailed upon the Prime Minister. Their information was that the Sheikh was 'gradually adapting himself' to the fact that the accession of Kashmir to India was irrevocable.²⁶ Once he returned to Kashmir, Abdullah, as ever, made contradictory statements; saying at one place that he would discuss 'all possibilities' with the Indian government and, at

²⁴ JJ Singh to Indira Gandhi, 11 June 1967, Subject File Serial No 87, III Instalment, JP Papers.

²⁵ PN Haksar to Indira Gandhi, 14 September 1967, Subject File Serial No 195, III Instalment, PN Haksar Papers, NMML.

²⁶ See Subject File Serial No 128, III Instalment, PN Haksar Papers.

another that he would never compromise on the Kashmiri ‘right to self-determination’.²⁷ To the *Daily Telegraph*, he offered a three-way solution: Jammu to go to India, ‘Azad’ Kashmir to Pakistan, with the valley – the real bone of contention – to be put under UN trusteeship for five years, after which it would vote on whether to join India or Pakistan, or be independent.²⁸

However, neither the state administration nor the centre seemingly took notice. GM Sadiq told Haksar that, ‘while one could be justified in expressing a sense of unease at some of the statements made by Sheikh Saheb, the fact remains that the impact of such statements has not been of a kind and character as to cause us undue worry’.²⁹ Sadiq shared the Union Home Ministry’s confidence about the law and order situation in the state and wanted the Sheikh to be ‘given wide latitude’. He, however, wanted the Sheikh to be probed about his intentions when he returned to New Delhi. Sadiq agreed with the necessity of dialogue with Abdullah but wanted to avoid ‘a bald approach where Government invites him to make proposals’. JP, meanwhile, was trying to reach out to the opposition to offer support to the government in case they decided to open talks with the Sheikh. His double-barrelled stand was ‘solution within Indian Union and “special status” to Kashmir’. He was convinced that

...the Prime Minister, left to herself, would like to move on the lines that we are proposing. The greatest difficulty is her own party. The Deputy Prime Minister [Morarji Desai], as you know, is dead against such a status being given to Kashmir on the plea that the same status would be

²⁷ *Thought*, 16 March, 6 July and 19 October 1968.

²⁸ *Daily Telegraph*, 27 June 1968.

²⁹ P N Haksar to Indira Gandhi, 8 April 1968, Subject File Serial No 36, Guard Files, I & II Instalments, PN Haksar Papers.

demanding by every other state in India! Indeed, he is said to be pressing for the abrogation of Article 370.³⁰

Instead, he hoped to persuade enough MPs to take a realistic and reasonable line facilitating a constructive initiative from the Government. But, the Indian politicians had a very low opinion of the embittered Sheikh. SA Dange of the Communist Party of India (CPI) spoke for many, when he told JP that Abdullah

...feels and talks like a “King of Kashmir”, trying to preserve “his people” and kingdom from two “giant grabbers” – India and Pakistan. At the same time, he is a little soft to Pakistan, that being, perhaps, due to a slight tinge of religious affinity though it is to his credit that he is not communal-minded at all. And, he also thinks that by “physical affinity”, the trade of Kashmir has to flow towards Pakistan.³¹

Remembering a typical incident, representative of both the Sheikh and his Indian political counterparts, Dange told JP that he had ‘bluntly asked him why he does not call himself an Indian and acknowledge Indian nationality. He said that he did it as a reaction to those who wanted to force things on him and misrepresent him’. As for Indian bureaucrats, they suffered from the same old problem as reflected by Union Home Secretary LP Singh’s comment to JJ: ‘who is to take the initiative in this matter from the Government of India?’³²

1970-72

³⁰ JP to SA Dange, 30 October 1968, Subject File Serial No 93, III Instalment, JP Papers.

³¹ SA Dange to JP, 16 October 1968, Subject File Serial No 93, III Instalment, JP Papers.

³² JJ Singh to JP mentioning his talks with LP Singh, 23 April 1969, Correspondences, III Instalment, JP Papers.

More so, as 1971 was to be another election year. Helming a minority government with the support of the CPI, since the Congress split of 1969, Mrs Gandhi called for an early election and emerged triumphant on the back of the slogan '*garibi hatao*' and her 'few stray economic thoughts', which had led to the nationalisation of banks and abolishing the privy purses and privileges of the princely states (Guha, 2008). But, her strengthened emergence was in future and meanwhile, as always, Abdullah was not proving particularly helpful for anybody by his propensity to issue statements. *The Statesman* editorial of 16 June 1970, 'A Mid-Summer Dream', attributed the following words to him: 'We will wrest our freedom as Indians did from the British and the Algerians did from the French'. Noting the unusually strong words and wondering the possibility of misquote, a tired JP complained to JJ that 'when this happens too often, the credibility gap becomes unbridgeable'. For him, it was one thing 'to insist on ascertaining the wishes of the people (in any reasonable manner) and quite another to talk of fighting for independence, as if the Kashmiris had already expressed their wish to be independent'. By now, JP's interest in Kashmir was paling in front of the 'intensive grass-root work which in the circumstances has become the most important for me' as well as given the 'present climate of Indian politics where words take the place of action and where everyone talks with his tongue in cheek'.³³

JJ Singh agreed about the lack of consistency in Sheikh's statements but sought to explain it: 'You know as well as I do that sometimes when Sheikh Sahib is needled or maliciously attacked, he gets angry and makes emotional statements which, in my opinion, do not represent his true

³³ JP to JJ Singh, 19 June 1970, Correspondences, III Instalment, JP Papers.

feelings’.³⁴ He remained hopeful that Abdullah would be willing to accept a solution within the four corners of India, provided some face-saving devices were included in the settlement for him to convince his people that it was in their interest. It was only then that he could bring the people along with him into India’s corner and his services could be used to create better emotional integration between the people of Kashmir and the people in the rest of the country. With elections scheduled for March 1971, once again the Sheikh was kept away from the state and, once again, his friends took up his case. Mridula Sarabhai in a handwritten note of 9 January 1971 appealed to the Prime Minister, ‘with deep regret and in agony’. As usual, the fiery activist minced no words.

With externment of Beg Sahib from the J&K State and order to stay in Delhi on Sheikh Sahib, the die is cast for rule of repression and elections being held in fearful atmosphere and far from free and fair. Your “friends” say this is done to avoid “letting down” those who have supported you till now. Soon you will know who have been your real friends – we who have been pleading against this or those who are advising to appease those who backed you [with] a long-rung view to topple you ultimately. JP and others also have tried to plead with you to hold back. Are they all biased?...The very reactionary elements you are fighting have succeeded in getting their brethren Bakshi and DP and Mir Qasim to gain hand on your policy.³⁵

The Prime Minister’s tired scribble on the margin says it all: ‘Secy [Haksar] to see: would he meet Mridulaji?’ Two days later, it was JP’s turn. He sent the Prime Minister a copy of his press statement of 9 January 1971 on the externment orders served by Sadiq’s Ministry in Srinagar, with the concurrence of New Delhi, on Abdullah, Afzal Beg and GM Shah, in which

³⁴ JJ Singh to JP, 23 June 1970, Correspondences, III Instalment, JP Papers.

³⁵ Mridula Sarabhai to Indira Gandhi, 9 January 1971, Subject File Serial No 191, Notes as PS to PM, 1967-73, III Instalment, PN Haksar Papers.

he had termed it ‘foolish and cowardly’. In the accompanying letter, mixing the political with the personal, JP fervently but optimistically hoped that she would reconsider her decision ‘otherwise I fear history will show that not only have you done a great harm to the country’s interests but you have also done a great wrong to yourself’.³⁶ His personal pleadings to the Prime Minister as well as her Secretary, Haksar, went unheeded. Apart from Haksar, Indira Gandhi’s advisers, at this time, included four other prominent Kashmiri Pandits – Indian Ambassador to Moscow and Kashmir politician DP Dhar, the powerful Foreign Secretary TN Kaul, Haksar’s successor and the economist PN Dhar and the newly created intelligence agency RAW’s chief RN Kao (Dhar, 2000). JP called the decision to keep Abdullah away from Kashmir ‘Indira’s surrender to her Kashmiri stooges who are running this country at present’.³⁷ He was quite prophetic in his musings on the issue:

Indira might have check-mated Sheikh Saheb’s move...but she has killed democracy in Kashmir and driven an iron into the soul of the people there that will for ever be stirring the smouldering fire of hatred for India. Indira may not be PM when, years from now, those fires might leap into uncontrollable flames. Lies and repression have never succeeded in the end.

JP continued to fight for the Sheikh’s rights. He wrote again to Gandhi after her overwhelming national victory and appealed that the externment order of Abdullah and his associates, which was getting over in early April should not be extended. ‘Now that your position in your party and in the Lok Sabha is overwhelmingly strong’, JP hoped, ‘there should be no inhibition in your acting according to your judgement’.³⁸ For JP, not allowing the Sheikh and others to

³⁶ JP to Indira Gandhi, 11 January 1971, Miscellaneous Subject File Serial No 214, PN Haksar Papers.

³⁷ JP to JJ Singh, 1 February 1971, Correspondences, III Instalment, JP Papers.

³⁸ JP to Indira Gandhi, 26 March 1971, Subject File Serial No 93, III Instalment, JP Papers.

participate in the 1971 elections was a missed opportunity not just of easing tensions in Kashmir and strengthening the democratic aspirations, but also in establishing mutual understanding between the Sheikh's National Conference and other political parties. JP hoped that it was not too late to win the hearts and minds of the Kashmiris and mentioned the political catharsis brought about in Srinagar by the victory of the National Conference's Mr Shamim Ahmad Shamim. JP was to leave soon thereafter as Mrs Gandhi's special roving envoy to the world on the East Bengal crisis and thus was cut from the Kashmir scene. But, JJ Singh continued to meet Abdullah, visit Srinagar and keep JP abreast of the developments. While he may not have detected much sympathy amongst Kashmiri Muslims for the East Bengal Muslims, more worryingly it seemed to him that the Sheikh himself was reflecting this opinion. Abdullah had been disappointed, when he was not allowed to travel to Srinagar at the time of his daughter's wedding and there was bitterness and anguish among his supporters.³⁹ Throughout 1971, Sheikh Abdullah lived in Delhi and saw from close quarters Indira Gandhi's emergence as a national leader. India's emphatic victory over Pakistan in the war of December 1971 made it clear to him that independence for his people was out of question. There was a "measure of disillusionment" in the secessionist camp and even radicals in the Valley were talking of a settlement within the framework of the Indian Constitution' (Guha, 2008, p. 475).

1972-75

On 2 June 1972, Haksar sent a note to the Prime Minister in which he shared with her his impressions of a survey he had commissioned the Director, Intelligence Bureau, to conduct on 'the real feelings of the Kashmir peasantry towards Sheikh Abdullah'. To Haksar,

³⁹ JJ Singh (Srinagar) to JP (Moscow), 10 June 1971, Correspondences, III Instalment, JP Papers.

...the survey revealed that Sheikh Sahib was held in high esteem and affection by the peasantry. He symbolises Kashmir to them. There was no visible erosion of this feeling. It was also established that no one regards Sheikh Sahib as an agent of Pakistan. Indeed, there was no pro-Pakistan feeling as such among the peasantry. While the universality of feeling of esteem and affection for Sheikh Sahib remained steadfast, there was no visible tendency to rise in revolt against India. But there was a feeling of sadness that India should deal with a true Kashmir patriot in so harsh and unjust a manner.⁴⁰

Haksar concluded that

...we have been lacking in subtlety in handling Sheikh Abdullah. A variety of vested interests have made the task of looking at Sheikh Abdullah, as he is, an extremely difficult one. Nevertheless, it was imperative to make a fresh start and lead him by hand on the difficult and tortuous road whose ultimate destination would be reconciliation – a reconciliation based more on the sharing of common emotions, rather than narrow political aspirations. I feel that Sheikh Sahib would respond to this treatment more than any other treatment, as he must be a very deeply hurt man – so hurt indeed that he rationalises everything.

Even otherwise, Haksar was alert to the moral and political position in the wake of the upcoming Simla Summit with Pakistan. He emphasised the ‘imperative necessity of not keeping Sheikh Abdullah in our custody and thus having his skeleton in our cupboard when we talk to President Bhutto and tell him that Kashmir is ours with Sheikh Abdullah in our custody rather than a free man’. Haksar had already spoken with DP Dhar and Dhar and GM

⁴⁰ PN Haksar to Indira Gandhi, 2 June 1972, Subject File Serial No 53, Guard Files, I & II Instalments, PN

Sadiq had met the Prime Minister and agreed that the Sheikh should be immediately released. But, merely releasing Sheikh Abdullah was not enough in Haksar's eyes. The adroit adviser wanted Gandhi to add a personal touch, meet Abdullah and hear with forbearance, if he poured out his long tale of woes and, unburdened himself. Thereafter, they could begin, step-by-step, the long journey towards reconciliation.

Abdullah met Mrs Gandhi on 10 June 1972, wherein she expressed her desire to take a fresh look at the India-Kashmir relationship. Thanking Haksar for his 'humane approach' which had facilitated the meeting, the indefatigable Mridula Sarabhai hoped that 'the approach will not be as if Indiraji and Sheikh Sahib represent two different interests. As in old days (prior to 1953 – Sheikh Sahib was encouraged to play a role of a colleague – jointly in solving national problems, especially of Kashmir) today Sheikh Sahib should be asked to do the same'.⁴¹ Two days later, Haksar suggested to the Prime Minister that 'G Parthasarathy should be told that the proposed dialogue – and it should be a dialogue rather than a "negotiation" – should be conducted quietly without publicity. The object of this dialogue is to find the terms and conditions on which Sheikh Abdullah could participate in the political life not merely of Kashmir but of India as a whole'.⁴² Haksar cautioned that 'the dialogue is not intended to upset the existing set-up in Kashmir but to look to the future. The question of autonomy should be discussed not in abstract but concretely in terms of genuine interest of the people of Kashmir. The dialogue should be a prolonged one...Parthasarathy should hasten slowly'.

⁴¹ Mridula Sarabhai to PN Haksar, 10 June 1972, Miscellaneous Subject File Serial No 214, PN Haksar Papers.

⁴² PN Haksar to Indira Gandhi, 12 June 1972, Miscellaneous Subject File Serial No 214, PN Haksar Papers.

Haksar himself met Afzal Beg in July 1972 and found him ‘anxious to create a sensation of forward movement’. He told Beg that ‘Sheikh Saheb tended to make “instant” responses to questions put to him’ consequently creating undesirable impressions. Beg should dissuade him from this and make him sustain a particular position. It was important for everyone to feel that ‘such differences as exist between us are those between brothers and fellow citizens of India and should be settled by means of a dialogue’. It was important to establish trust because ‘impression has gone round that both Beg and Sheikh had in the past allowed their basic loyalty to seek a solution within the framework of India to be doubted’. After all, ‘the audience of Sheikh Saheb did not consist merely of the people of Valley but also of Jammu and naturally the rest of India...we have to work together within a framework of a concept of the future and both of us have to forget the past’.⁴³ On his part, Beg sought the assurance, even if not to be publicly repeated, that Haksar and Parthasarathy concede the principle that relations between India and Kashmir were based on the Instrument of Accession as, once this was conceded, they could work out the basis of their present relationship.

Meanwhile, Sheikh Abdullah, who had been allowed back into Kashmir had been, in his turn, preparing the ground for an honourable settlement with India. In September, while speaking at a function to mark his 67th birthday, he went so far as to say that ‘I am an Indian and India is my homeland’ (Guha, 2008, p. 475). During 1973-74, there followed talks between Afzal Beg, representing the Sheikh and Parthasarathy, representing Gandhi. The Sheikh approached these talks clear in his mind that he could return as the Chief Minister of Kashmir only on the basis of the position as it existed, before his first removal, on 8 August 1953 (Noorani, 2011, p.

⁴³ PN Haksar to Indira Gandhi, 26 July 1972, Subject File Serial No 182, III Instalment, PN Haksar Papers.

403).⁴⁴ After dispensing off matters of agreements, Parthasarathy and Afzal Beg ran into matters reserved for further discussion given the divergent views. These were narrowed down to three aspects: fundamental rights of Indian constitution to be incorporated into the state constitution, the position of the Central Election Commission and article 356 of the Indian constitution, which allowed the Centre to remove the State Governments subject to safeguards (Noorani, 2011, pp. 406-07).⁴⁵ These assumed urgency and frequency in November 1974. The Sheikh now wrote directly to the Prime Minister trusting her to ‘kindly accommodate our view point to enable me to achieve the main objective’ and requesting a meeting to discuss these (Noorani, 2011, p. 408).⁴⁶ In reply, Gandhi doubted ‘whether anything will be gained by our discussing these matters again’, as there had been thorough discussions between Beg and Parthasarathy and stressed on a uniform application of the Indian constitution among the state governments (Noorani, 2011, pp. 408-09).⁴⁷ A pained Abdullah now wrote a long, anguished letter to her starting with ‘the decades of my sufferings and sacrifices’, pointing the ‘the lack of trust which continues to exist in the minds of those with whom I may have to deal in the future [i.e. Government of India]’, arguing about the systematic erosion of the letter and spirit of the special status guaranteed to Kashmir by the article 370 of the Indian constitution, and remembering his forced exclusion from every election – state (in any case, not quite above board) or national – since 1953. He concluded succinctly that his

...differences with India were not over the issue of the accession of Kashmir to India but on the quantum of accession. In my opinion, accession and autonomy are inter-dependent. I had agreed to

⁴⁴ Sheikh Abdullah to G Parthasarathy, 23 August 1974.

⁴⁵ Afzal Beg-Parthasarathy correspondence, 13 November 1974.

⁴⁶ Sheikh Abdullah to Indira Gandhi, 25 November 1974.

⁴⁷ Indira Gandhi to Sheikh Abdullah, 16 December 1974.

throw in my lot with India on the basis of the Instrument of Accession signed by the Maharaja which guaranteed complete internal autonomy to the state. If this autonomy is taken away, then the very foundation of the relationship is destroyed (Noorani, 2011, pp. 409-12).⁴⁸

Things could only move forward from this point, if not get better. By early February 1975, a text of conclusions reached between Beg and Parthasarathi was ready. Sheikh Abdullah was hopeful that they provided a good basis for his political cooperation with New Delhi and for Centre-State relationship, 'without damaging either Kashmiri sentiments or Congress ambitions' (Noorani, 2011, pp. 412-13; Guha, 2008, pp. 475-76).⁴⁹ Indira Gandhi was appreciative of the spirit in which the Sheikh had expressed his agreement, while bearing in mind that 'the clock cannot be put back' (Noorani, 2011, p. 414).⁵⁰ He was sworn in as Chief Minister on 25 February 1975 with the support of the Congress legislative party in Jammu and Kashmir.

Conclusion

It is the period 1965-75, during which Sheikh Abdullah marched towards his political sunset, from being the critical 'factor' for the Kashmiri Muslims in the crisis of 1947.⁵¹ A different generation, disillusioned and disenchanted with the gap between the ideals of India's democracy and the reality of its relationship with Kashmir, was finding different heroes. Amanullah Khan (1934-2016) and Maqbool Butt (1938-1984) were emerging as the voice of

⁴⁸ Sheikh Abdullah to Indira Gandhi, 29 December 1974.

⁴⁹ Sheikh Abdullah to Indira Gandhi, 11 February 1975.

⁵⁰ Indira Gandhi to Sheikh Abdullah, 12 February 1975.

⁵¹ See Copland, 'The Abdullah Factor'.

Kashmiri national consciousness, as the old Jammu Kashmir Plebiscite Front of Sheikh's associate Afzal Beg was evolving into National Liberation Front and later Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (1977). These years provide the pre-history for the violent turn of events inside Kashmir from November 1989. Sheikh Abdullah's travails between the themes of sub-nationalism, self-determination and separatism – as seen through the article – continues to leave a shadow on New Delhi's political relationship with Srinagar. His political life shot through every one of the phases of Kashmir's modern history: externally those of regional rivalry, international intervention, religious identity and conflict resolution and internally, between its princely rulers and the colonial state until 1947 and between its political leaders and India/Pakistan since then, between the 'state' and the 'subject' within Kashmir and, between its different populations/territories. Where, however, his legacy reaches its limits is the place of Kashmir today, in subcontinental scaffoldings, as a part of the wider debates on Hindu Nationalism, Islam and *Jihad*. The context and content of Abdullah's trajectory in the period under study above has to be put against the twin historical backgrounds of resistance: his *personal* and the states' *political*. Ghulam Ahmad (IAS), who had the somewhat unique distinction of serving, first, as Principal Secretary to Abdullah's *bete noire* Mir Qasim from 1972 to 1975, then, to the Sheikh himself, from 1975 to 1982 and, finally, to Abdullah's son-in-law GM Shah, when he became the Chief Minister (1984-86), summed up Sheikh Abdullah thus:

His rise was meteoric and tumultuous; his entire public life was tempestuous and his death an equally thunderous event. No doubt, he rode like a colossus on the crest of waves of popularity as also resentment and implacable hatred...Perhaps it was destined that in the twilight of his life he should accept a position quite below his stature and succumb to temptations of office and

accompanying transitory comforts, which brought him tumbling down from the high pedestal of a demi-god down to the abysmal depths of ignominy.⁵²

Abdullah's political life began in resistance against the autocratic and feudal Hindu Dogra rule in the 1930s,⁵³ under the banner of Kashmir Muslim Conference and its successor the National Conference, before turning towards the All India States People's Conference and the Indian National Conference in the 1940s. In thematic terms, it symbolised the overlaying, on a search for identity, equality and autonomy,⁵⁴ of the mirage of secular-national. In the 1950s, this overlain fabric developed cracks and a seemingly *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* Abdullah emerged: sometimes, seeking his *Sultanate* and on other occasions, subduing himself within the *Maha-Bharat*. As the cracks widened, New Delhi cracked down on Abdullah and Kashmir and he spent much of the 1960s forlorn, apparently forgotten and certainly far-away from Kashmir. However, as we saw above, the 1970s saw him return and being presented to Kashmir and India *alike* as not only the 'Lion of Kashmir' but a 'lion of India', albeit tamed, in the words of India's President Neelam Sanjiva Reddy (1977-82) (Jagmohan, 2006, p. 153). Final years of 'the Sheikh and his sheikhdome' in early-1980s were marked by the 'return of the prodigal' Plebiscite Front as the JKLF (Ahmad, 2008, p. 93) and the 'martyrdom of Maqbool Butt' (Ahmad, 2008, p. 145). The violent turn that Kashmir took from late-1980s emerged as a litmus test for Indian secularism and democracy. Howsoever explained as the tussle between an assertive centre and an alienated periphery, it thrust to the forefront manifestations of state suppression, petty politicking, social distrust and sectarian prejudice. The tone of the times to

⁵² Ahmad, *My Years with Sheikh Abdullah*, 9-10.

⁵³ See Naik, 'Landlords, Peasants and the Dogra Rule in Kashmir'.

⁵⁴ See Prasad, 'Sheikh Abdullah and the Land Reforms in Jammu and Kashmir'.

come was set as the acclaims of popularity of the Sheikh transmuted to charges of pusillanimity and the affection for Abdullah transmogrified into accusations of betrayal to the cause of *Azadi*.

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